

I sat in the folding seats of the theater and watched as the actors on the stage ran around like chickens with their heads cut off, trying to put out their flaming costumes. They were lighting up the set, and flaming shreds of clothes were flying out into the house.

I ran down the aisle towards the front of the theater, past numerous screaming, panicking people, past a small boy whose face was burning off. Up the other aisle, out the door, and into the foyer all the time with a vague feeling that something was wrong...

And I could hear them behind me. I wasn't sure who they were anymore; I think they started out as flying robots, but now they felt more human. I thought I lost them in the reservoir, but somehow they'd followed me to the theater.

That's when I put two and two together. Burning children, transforming enemies, and the halls of my old high school where there had been a twisting science fiction reservoir system. I was dreaming.

No, not dreaming. These were random images from my subconscious, but it wasn't just my mind romping through this surreal landscape, I'd brought my body with me too. I had a reason to be here...

Now that I was aware of the dreamscape around me, I could feel a pull from one end of the corridor; my subconscious mind, trying to lead me where it wanted me. To follow would be to give in to the dream, and although I would

have some control over my actions, I'd still be a puppet, following the will of my own mind. And now I could hear my pursuers closing on me; another attempt to bring me back into the dream. In real life, they would have caught me while I stood here undecided, but here they were just my guides, forcing me to stick to the path. I walked over to the wall, slid my hands palms out into the wall, and pushed. The wall warped and contorted in front of me, and a circular portal opened into earth's collective unconscious.

I stepped out into a dark void like the vacuum of outer space, only as I did so, it filled with a maelstrom of discordant experiences. Swirling, dancing lights that moved like they were alive; rainbows of color that flowed like water through the air; clouds and pinpoints of light; all in a constant state of flux, depicting images from within my own mind, and from the racial memory of every species on earth that dreams. Among the chaotic background came more real objects, the minds of my friends and family. They appeared as huge globes, pools of water, caves that should have led nowhere yet didn't, houses, buildings, and even sleeping faces, all different, some as chaotic and disorganized as the rest of the void. Each is, in effect and no matter what the form it takes, a bubble in a sea of consciousness, and most were boarded up, glazed over, covered with ice, or otherwise inaccessible; it was noon in the real world, and most of the people close to me were conscious and separated from the Dreaming Worlds. I should have been too, but with luck, I wouldn't be

missed; a few hours, or days, in dream space were usually only a few moments in the real world. That's how humans can average about 750 dreams a night. In the waking world, I was at work, debugging strings of code for the imminent release version of Quarantine. But during my coffee break, I sneaked off to the bathroom and hid in a stall, and then back flipped, body and soul, into the arms of Morpheus.

As I floated out into the void between the minds, the wall sealed behind me, locking me off from the hallways of my high school and the things that lurked within. I found my bearings, and rocked out into the void.

I had a bone to pick with someone or something in this place. It was the week of finals in night school and the final crunch before we released Quarantine, and the last thing I needed was to be distracted. But every night for the past week I had nightmares of a disjointed underwater hell, with incomprehensibly massive stone ruins that defied every rule of geometry I knew of. They were blanketed by diseased, glowing corals, and inhabited by demons that looked like a cross between a frog, a human, and a shark. I certainly didn't need to start mutating.

What, you thought I always looked like this? Jesus Christ, you're dumber than I am. I used to look normal. Then one day that very same day, in fact I woke up, fumbled into the bathroom, and almost screamed when I saw my reflection in the mirror. My eyes had nearly popped out of their sockets they

were so swollen, and my skin was all lined and wrinkled and was slippery like a fish. But the worse thing was when I first turned on the light, and I thought that one of the fish-things from my dream was staring at me.

Somehow, I could feel that my dreams and my changes were linked; like some dormant conduit in the back of my mind had been suddenly popped open, and the psychic equivalent of hormonal triggers were setting off genes no one knew I had. On second thought, my parents knew. I remember hushed discussions when they thought I was in bed about some kind of *genetic condition* on my mother's side of the family. A great, great grandparent with some kind of inherited cancer that made her start mutating one day, some warped strand of DNA that had lain dormant in all her descendants until me. Damn it, why'd I have to be the one to change? My mom certainly has enough relatives who deserve to look as freakish on the outside as they do on the inside...

In the back of my mind, there was this weird feeling I'd never had before; like some sort of conduit that had been there as long as I'd been alive, but had only now opened. That was my link to what was doing this to me. I was sure that there was something tangible behind my nightmares and my changing, not just stress and inherited genes.

I always used to think of this place as a metaphor. A sea of psychic energy, bubbles to represent each person's mind, swirling lights and colors, a real

place? I never thought so. I'm no longer sure why, though...

Anyway, I concentrated on turning the conduit in my head into another metaphor; a real path to follow, something that would lead me to my hidden puppet master. It almost worked; nothing physical, no golden brick road, but I could feel a distinct pull in a definite direction. A thought, and I was on my way.

Time is relative in the Dreaming Realms; how else could someone fit what seems like several hours of experiences into the space of 15 seconds, the average length of a dream? I'm not sure how long I spent inside my head, but it seemed like hours of monotonous cruising, and I started to day dream: my mind calling up images from my subconscious, and projecting them around me. It was in this distracted state that I reached my destination.

It was huge, blacker than anything could have possibly been, shaped like a distorted, ever-changing stone temple or monolith, and it completely blocked my vision; and I almost collided with it, I was so distracted. People's minds in here take on set shapes - pools of water, shimmering bubbles, homes of their childhood - but they weren't supposed to do this. Distance is also relative in this realm, and the size of your personal metaphor reflects your personality; introverts with low self-esteem will have tiny, drab metaphors, while egomaniacs make stuff large and flamboyant. This thing must have thought it was God.

As I floated back to a safer distance, I could make out smaller forms flitting

around the black temple; hideous, indescribable abominations. Huge, bubbling masses of formless black jelly, seething and writing and forming almost-recognizable limbs; faceless monstrosities with huge, bat-like wings and human bodies; the creatures from my disjointed nightmares, men unnaturally merged with fish or sharks; and giant, squid-like monsters whose tentacles seemed more like arms, legs, or wings than anything else.

As I watched, concealed from these things by the shifting colors and gaseous streams, the temple contorted and reshaped itself. A huge bubble forced itself out of the flat walls of the temple or was it a crypt?and as I watched, it took on definition. A mass of fleshy pseudopods forced their way out of the bubble near its base, and a pair of globes popped out of its upper surface. The pseudopods, or tentacle, stretched out in my direction, and what had been a bubble became a face, and then a head, as it pushed out of the liquid wall of the temple. The surface of the twin globes on the bubble, rolled back from the middle, like a pair of eyes. Under the lids, I could see myself reflected, but the reflection wasn't of what the massive thing saw, but of what it imagined. It imagined my death, at the hands of its servants that swarmed around It, or those in the physical world, or at Its own tentacles. And as I turned from the thing and sped off screaming into the ether, I saw my body contorting and mutating, as my eyes bulged out of their sockets, and my skin turned slippery and wet, and I began to look more like a shark than a human...

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I'm not exactly sure about the sequence of events after that. I remember screaming. For hours. I might have still be in the dreams, but maybe not. Probably not, cause I remember being alone when I filtered back to the real world, and if I had been screaming there, people would have heard it. I also remember my reflection in the mirror on the way out. My eyes were huge and bulging out of their sockets, and what looked like gill slits were trying to rip open along the sides of my neck, and my skin was all smooth and hairless, even my head. And I remember looks of horror from my fellow workers as I raced to the elevator.

See, it's all hazy, up until I woke up in the surgeon's chair, and after that, it never got too much more distinct. Now I no longer dream at all, and I've lost everything that made me special. My ability to do my job, any talents I ever had. Including my less definable ones. My imagination is gone, and so are my dreams. All of them, not just the bad ones. And it gets harder and harder to remember anything, except what led up to that horrible encounter inside my mind. I had to quit my job because I didn't understand it anymore, and I lost most of my friends. Which is all right, because I didn't enjoy them trying to pretend my new face didn't sicken them.

Anyway, occultists have always said that the pineal gland is the *Third Eye*,

the thing that produces ESP and all that, and science has proved that it's some kind of atrophied sense organ. Whatever it is, after my experiences, I found a surgeon who wouldn't ask questions if you waved enough money in his face, and had mine surgically removed. If I would think very deeply on it, I would probably realize that it saved my sanity, since I can no longer ponder on the things that messed up my world. But sometimes I'm not so sure... sometimes I feel that in a reality with things like that, only the dead can be completely sane...